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Obama's visit to Hiroshima: Why won't he apologize for a war crime?

Monday 30 May 2016, by [PETERSEN-SMITH Khury](#) (Date first published: 27 May 2016).

Barack Obama will visit Hiroshima, but the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize is in Asia to promote militarism and imperial rivalries, writes Khury Petersen-Smith.

MAYBE HISTORY will measure Barack Obama's tenure as president not by the number of years that he spent in office, but by the number of hopes that he betrayed.

The true scale of U.S. empire's devastation while Obama was at the helm won't be known until he leaves office early next year. Only then will we know the total number of countries bombed by Obama—we're at seven so far [1]—of children killed by U.S. forces [2], of non-combatants killed by Obama's wildly escalated drone war [3], of hospitals bombed by the U.S. [4] and its allies [5], of Palestinian land stolen by Israeli forces equipped with U.S. weapons and bolstered by Obama's enthusiastic support [6], and unfortunately, the list could go on.

Most of these crimes weren't direct betrayals of specific demands. When Obama took office, no one petitioned him to not bomb a hospital and then absolve those who committed the atrocity. For most of his progressive supporters, this was simply unimaginable—yet that's exactly what Obama did.

For the most part, acts like these were not reversals of specific promises that Obama made, but rather steps, one after the other, along the same path that Obama's predecessor George W. Bush walked, taking us further down the road of American imperial violence.

But there are a few exceptions. Along with Obama's broken promise to close the U.S. torture site at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, there is another example of activists making a demand on the U.S. empire under Obama—to which the president is responding by doing the opposite.

IN EARLY 2009, shortly after his inauguration, young people in Hiroshima, Japan, began the President Obama Invitation Project to get Obama to visit one of the two cities that the U.S. destroyed with atomic weapons in August 1945—still the only use of nuclear weapons as an act of war.

If Obama accepted, he would become the first sitting president to visit Hiroshima. Presumably, his visit would both express and bolster the president's stated commitment to nuclear disarmament and peace. As Japanese journalist Fumio Matsuo pointed out at the time [7], "Japan and the U.S. have yet to take responsibility for their actions during the war. In that sense, a ceremony in which a U.S. president lays a wreath in memory of the victims of the bombing of Hiroshima would be a big first step."

Hibakusha—the Japanese name for survivors of the atomic bombings—became involved with the Invitation Project. Ultimately, hundreds of letters were written as part of the initiative. Former Rep. Dennis Kucinich agreed to deliver the letters to the White House.

Later that year, Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, in part for his supposed commitment to nuclear disarmament. Despite such expectations for Obama's presidency, he was silent in response on the call to visit Hiroshima, as *SocialistWorker.org* pointed out last year [8].

Silent until now. On Friday, Obama did become the first sitting president to visit the site of American nuclear attack in 1945. He laid a wreath at a memorial to the victims of the bomb and delivered an address that captured the essence of his presidency: he was solemn and moving, and his speech was elegant in form, but its content was dangerous.

While Obama spoke to the horror of the U.S. attacks, he never apologized for them. When asked, prior to arriving in Japan, about whether he would do so, Obama shrugged off President Truman's choice to annihilate Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In comments to the national Japanese broadcaster NHK [9], Obama shrugged off President Harry Truman's decision to annihilate Hiroshima and Nagasaki, claiming that "every leader makes very difficult decisions."

IF THESE callous words aren't enough of an insult to survivors of the atomic bombing and those in solidarity with them—many of whom once believed Obama was on their side—then consider this: Obama's visit to Hiroshima is part of a larger trip to the region aimed at further militarizing Asia.

On Monday, Obama announced from Hanoi that the U.S. would lift its arms embargo against Vietnam. The move has everything to do with U.S. imperial strategy—and Obama's signature foreign policy initiative—the so-called "pivot to Asia," which involves arming and rallying U.S. allies against America's rising rival in the Pacific region and around the globe: China.

This is why Obama's words in Hiroshima were actually deceptive. In a guestbook at the Hiroshima peace museum and memorial, Obama wrote, "Let us now find the courage, together, to spread peace, and pursue a world without nuclear weapons." This led the *Washington Post* to headline its article about the president's visit: "71 years after the first atomic strike, Obama calls for the end of nuclear weapons at Hiroshima." [10] If Obama has appeared once again to be a proponent of nuclear disarmament, the reality is far more disturbing.

Obama's military policies have not just promoted a future of war in general, but nuclear war in particular. As the *New York Times* reported in January [11], Obama has launched a three-decade, \$1 trillion program to develop a new generation of the B61 nuclear bomb. The B61 is a "variable yield" weapon, meaning that its destructive capacity can be adjusted to the desire of commanding military officers.

Because it is possible to use a B61 bomb with devastation short of the catastrophic destruction wreaked on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it is considered a "tactical nuclear weapon."

The "variable yield" feature makes the use of nuclear weapons more likely. As Gen. James E. Cartwright told the Times, "What going smaller does is make to make the weapon more thinkable."

OBAMA ALSO used his Hiroshima speech to tell a story of U.S.-Japanese reconciliation. "Since that day, we have made choices that give us hope," he said. "The United States and Japan have forged not only an alliance, but a friendship."

This happy-ending narrative glosses over the humiliating U.S. occupation of Japan following the war, when U.S. Gen. Douglas MacArthur ran Japan like a dictator, and poverty and sexual violence at the hands of U.S. troops were features of life for ordinary Japanese.

Moreover, one must ask the character of the U.S.-Japanese "friendship" since the end of the occupation. If the story Obama told in Hiroshima about warring rivals finding peace and

reconciliation, the reality is that the U.S.-Japan alliance is based on carrying out military violence elsewhere.

Japan served as the U.S. base of operations for its wars in Korea in the 1950s and Vietnam and Southeast Asia in the 1960s and '70s. The U.S. and the Japanese state have collaborated as “friends” in the continuing colonial subjugation of Okinawa. This place, which has been forced to endure 75 percent of the U.S. military bases in Japan, though it constitutes less than 1 percent of Japan’s territory, is the site for ongoing U.S. violence.

In fact, the week before Obama’s visit, the body of Rina Shimabukuro was found in Okinawa weeks after she had gone missing. A former U.S. Marine allegedly abducted, raped and murdered Shimabikuro, and then hid her body. Shimabukuro is only the latest victim in decades of such violence, carried out by U.S. personnel and tolerated by the Japanese government.

Last year, an antiwar movement erupted in Japan in response to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s plans to rewrite the Japanese constitution. Abe’s amendment—also in line with Washington’s “pivot to Asia”—would change Article 9, which is meant to undermine Japanese military power. Abe wants changes to allow for a more aggressive Japanese military.

The movement against revising the constitution—which has been led by a new, younger generation of Japanese activists—has been a hopeful ray of light in a region darkened by the storm clouds of nationalism and militarization promoted by governments throughout Asia, with eager support from the U.S.

With his actions in Asia this week, Obama has once again fallen on the wrong side of history—and of the present. Throughout his presidency, he has proven to be a champion of imperial war, not an opponent.

By contrast, our resistance to militarism in Japan and throughout the region is the best way to honor the memory of those murdered in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It represents the hope that such crimes will never happen again.

Khury Petersen-Smith

P.S.

* “Why won’t Obama apologize for a war crime?”. Socialist Worker (USA). May 27, 2016:
<https://socialistworker.org/2016/05/27/why-wont-obama-apologize-for-a-war-crime>

Footnotes

[1] <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/23/politics/countries-obama-bombed/>

[2] <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/cross-check/where-is-outcry-over-children-killed-by-u-s-led-forces/>

[3] <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-graphs/>

- [4] <http://www.msf.org/en/topics/kunduz-hospital-airstrike>
- [5] <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/article/msf-supported-hospital-bombed-northern-yemen>
- [6] <https://www.whitehouse.gov/advancing-israels-security>
- [7] http://www.hiroshimapeacemedia.jp/mediacenter/article.php?story=20091027111011867_en
- [8] See available on ESSF (article 38088), [70 years ago, Hiroshima-Nagasaki – One of history's worst war crimes](#).
- [9] <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/may/22/obama-japan-hiroshima-interview-no-apology>
- [10] https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-visits-hiroshima-more-than-seven-decades-after-the-worlds-first-atomic-strike/2016/05/27/c7d0d250-23b6-11e6-8690-f14ca9de2972_story.html
- [11] http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/12/science/as-us-modernizes-nuclear-weapons-smaller-leaves-some-uneasy.html?_r=4